DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 769 EC 301 699

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TITLE Cluster Grouping Fact Sheet: How To Provide Full-Time Services for Gifted Students on Existing Budgets.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 7p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phantom Press, 15 Lombard Circle, Lombard, IL ($1).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Organization; *Cluster Grouping; Educational Methods; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Group Structure; *Homogeneous Grouping; *Small Group Instruction

ABSTRACT

This fact sheet on cluster grouping of gifted students explains what cluster groups are, contrasts cluster grouping with tracking, offers a rationale for cluster grouping, outlines the special learning needs of gifted students, lists specific skills needed by cluster teachers, points out that cluster grouping should supplement rather than replace pull-out programs for gifted students, and examines the advantages and disadvantages of using the cluster grouping concept. The fact sheet concludes that the practice of cluster grouping represents a mindful way to ensure that gifted students continue to receive a quality education at the same time as schools work to improve learning opportunities for all their students. (JDD)

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CLUSTER GROUPING FACT SHEET

HOW TO PROVIDE FULL-TIME SERVICES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS ON EXISTING BUDGETS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PLACE GIFTED STUDENTS IN CLUSTER GROUPS?

A group of four-six identified gifted students, usually those in the top 5% of the grade level population in ability, are *clustered* in the classroom of one teacher who has special training in how to teach gifted students. The other students in that class are of mixed ability. If there are more than six gifted students, two or more clusters may be formed.

ISN'T CLUSTER GROUPING THE SAME AS TRACKING?

No, they are different. In a tracking system, all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day, and students tend to remain in the same track throughout their school experience. Research by Kulik and Kulik documents that gifted students benefit from learning together, and need to be placed with students of similar ability in their areas of strength. Cluster grouping of gifted students allows them to learn together while avoiding permanent grouping arrangements for children of other ability levels. As a matter of fact, schools can maintain separate sections for the most able students, while grouping all other students heterogeneously.

WHY SHOULD GIFTED STUDENTS BE PLACED IN A CLUSTER GROUP INSTEAD OF BEING ASSIGNED EVENLY TO ALL CLASSES?

When teachers try to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, it becomes extremely difficult to provide adequately for everyone. Often, the highest ability students are expected to "make it on their own". When a teacher has *several* gifted students, taking the time to meet their special learning needs seems more realistic. Furthermore, the social and emotional problems that occur when gifted students struggle to understand why they seem so different from their age peers may be avoided. Gifted students will actually remain more humble when they have consistent academic competition.

WHAT ARE THE SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS OF GIFTED STUDENTS?

Since these students have previously mastered many of the concepts they are expected to "learn" in a given class, a huge part of their school time may be wasted. They need exactly what all other students need; consistent opportunity to learn new material and to develop the behaviors that allow them to cope with the challenge and struggle of new learning.

CAN'T THESE LEARNING NEEDS BE MET IN HETEROGENEOUS CLASSES THAT USE COOPERATIVE LEARNING?

When gifted students are always placed in mixed-ability groups for cooperative learning, they frequently become bosses and/or tutors. Other students in these groups rely on the gifted to do most of the thinking, and may actually learn less than when the gifted students are not in their groups. When gifted students work in their own cooperative learning groups from time to time on appropriately challenging tasks, they are more likely to enjoy cooperative learning, while the other students learn to rely less on the gifted students and become more active learners. The best guidelines are that when the task is of the drill and practice type, gifted students should be learning how to cooperate in their own groups in which the task is difficult enough to *require* cooperation. When the task is open-ended and requires divergent thinking, it is more appropriate to include the gifted students in heterogeneous cooperative learning groups.

ISN'T IT ELITIST TO PROVIDE FOR THE NEEDS OF GIFTED STUDENTS IF OTHER STUDENTS CAN'T GET THEIR LEARNING NEEDS MET AS WELL?

It is inequitable to *prevent* gifted students from receiving an appropriately challenging education until other students get their learning needs met. The practice of cluster grouping for gifted students allows educators to come much closer to providing better educational services for all students, instead of sacrificing the needs of gifted students to the false perception that our educational system must choose which students to serve and which to ignore. Furthermore, in the non-cluster classrooms, teachers report they have the time to pay more attention to the special learning needs of those for whom learning may be more difficult. For that reason, some schools choose to not place struggling students in the same class that has the cluster group of gifted students.

HOW DOES THE CLUSTER GROUPING CONCEPT FIT IN WITH THE INCLUSION MODELS THAT ADVOCATE THE INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS INTO THE REGULAR CLASSROOM?

The Regular Education Initiative (REI) and the cluster grouping of gifted students are compatible concepts. Both are aimed at providing learning opportunities for students which allow them to actualize their learning potential. Gifted students also have exceptional educational needs, and require special provisions for having those needs met.

IF GIFTED STUDENTS ARE NOT PLACED IN SOME CLASSES, WON'T THOSE CLASSES LACK POSITIVE ROLE MODELS FOR ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LEADERSHIP?

Teachers overwhelmingly report that new leadership "rises to the top" in the non-cluster classes. There are many students other than the gifted who welcome opportunities to assume available leadership roles.

WON'T THE PRESENCE OF THE CLUSTERED GIFTED STUDENTS INHIBIT THE PERFORMANCE OF THE OTHER STUDENTS IN THAT CLASS, HAVING A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON THEIR ACHIEVEMENT?

This is not a problem when the cluster group is kept to a manageable size of no more than six students. As a matter of fact, cluster teachers report that there is general improvement in achievement for the entire class. The effects of the cluster grouping practice may be evened out over several years by rotating the cluster teacher assignment among specially trained teachers and also by rotating the other students so they have a chance to be in the same class with the cluster group.

WHAT SPECIFIC SKILLS ARE NEEDED BY CLUSTER TEACHERS?

Since the gifted are as far removed from the "norm" as the learning disabled, it is equally necessary for teachers of all exceptional children to have special training. Teachers of gifted students must know how to:

- recognize and nurture "gifted" behaviors
- understand the social-emotional needs of gifted youngsters
- allow students to demonstrate previous mastery of concepts
- provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material
- incorporate students' passionate interests into their independent studies
- facilitate sophisticated research investigations
- provide flexible grouping opportunities for the entire class

SHOULD THE CLUSTER GROUPING MODEL REPLACE PULL-OUT PROGRAMS FOR GIFTED STUDENTS?

No. Cluster grouping is one important component of a comprehensive program for gifted students. The services of a resource teacher may be used to provide assistance to all classroom teachers in their attempts to differentiate the curriculum for gifted students. If the resource teacher offers a "pull-out" class, there is usually less resistance from trained cluster teachers about students leaving the regular class for a resource program. Cluster grouping provides an effective complement to any gifted education program.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF USING THE CLUSTER GROUPING CONCEPT?

For the gifted students, the advantages are that they feel more accepted when there are other students just like them in the class. They are more likely to choose more challenging tasks when they are able to work with other gifted students. For the teachers, the advantages are that they no longer have to deal with the strain of trying to meet the needs of just one precocious student, while another teacher is experiencing similar strain with another precocious student in a different classroom. When teachers know several gifted students will benefit from differentiation efforts, it seems more realistic to make that differentiation available. For the school, the advantage is that it is finally possible to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, because their exceptional learning needs are more likely to be met when they are grouped together with a specially trained teacher.

WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF USING THE CLUSTER GROUPING CONCEPT?

In some communities, there may be pressure from parents to have their children placed in a cluster classroom, even if they are not in the actual cluster group. This situation may be handled by: providing training for all staff in compacting and differentiation so parents can expect those opportunities in all classes, rotating the cluster teacher assignment every two years among teachers who have had special training to demonstrate that many teachers are eligible to have the cluster group in their class, and even by cycling most students into the cluster teachers' classrooms on a rotating basis. Another potential problem is that that cluster grouping concept is effective only when teachers receive special training on how to differentiate the curriculum, and when their supervisor expects them to use those strategies consistently to maintain the integrity of the program.

IS CLUSTER GROUPING FEASIBLE ONLY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS?

No. Cluster grouping may be used at all grade levels and in all subject areas. Gifted students may be clustered in one section of any class with other students of mixed ability, especially when there are not enough students to form an advanced section of a course. Cluster grouping is also a welcome option in rural settings, or wherever small numbers of gifted students make programming difficult.

CONCLUSION:

There is an alarming trend in many places to eliminate programs that benefit gifted students, usually in the interest of returning all students to heterogeneous learning environments. Educators have been bombarded with information from many sources that makes it appear that there is no benefit to ability grouping for any students. The work of Kulik and Kulik, Allan, Feldhusen and others clearly documents the benefits of keeping gifted students together for at least part of the school day, in their areas of academic strength. Although there is evidence that average and below average students have more to gain from heterogeneous grouping, we must not make the mistake of thinking we have to choose between ability grouping and providing appropriate learning opportunities for gifted students. The practice of cluster grouping represents a mindful way to make sure gifted students continue to receive a quality education at the same time as schools work to improve learning opportunities for all our young people.

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Published by
PHANTOM PRESS
15 Lombard Circle
Lombard, IL 60148
November, 1991